

'You make the call'

By Sam Farr, Member of Congress

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Every two weeks I'm offered this space to pass along my thoughts on issues that affect Santa Cruz or topics that I think will be of interest to readers. But today, I'd like to switch things up a little bit: I'd like to circulate some of your own thoughts and concerns.

Last week, I hosted a live telephone town hall meeting in which I spoke with many residents of Santa Cruz. This new technology let's me reach out to the Central Coast while sitting in my office in Washington. I love my in-person town hall meetings I hold every year in August, but these phone calls allow me to keep in touch throughout the year.

During my call last week, I was able to address questions on a variety of issues that callers were concerned about. I'm sure other readers have many of the same questions on their minds, so today I'd like to review some of those discussions.

First, an issue that has been at the forefront of everyone's mind over the past several months is the aerial spraying to control the light brown apple moth. This issue affects us all, from families being sprayed to nurseries and farms hoping to control this pest. I return home to my wife, daughter and granddaughter every weekend and face the same risk as other Central Coast residents and worry just like they do.

First, we must be absolutely clear that no spraying would ever be worth putting our health in jeopardy. The state has faced criticism that it is ignoring the health of residents in favor of the agriculture and nursery industries, but I don't believe that to be true.

State officials are confident that their spraying is safe. The problem is, those reassurances just aren't enough. We need to include outside experts to make sure all health concerns are addressed in a thorough manner. To that end, I asked Edward Schafer, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, if he would consider bringing national health experts into the

mix, including the surgeon general. He has agreed to explore that strategy.

While LBAM was a big topic, there were a whole host of other questions I tackled throughout our hour-long conversation. A few of the questions I received, including a couple I didn't have time to answer, revolved around alternative fuel and energy. While I think the bill passed by Congress last year increasing vehicle fuel efficiency to 35 miles per gallon is a big first step, I think we have plenty of more room for advancement.

As in so many other areas, California is several steps ahead of the rest of the country on this issue. After all, we're the state that made the hybrid car popular. We're also tops for renewable energy: almost 11 percent of the energy California uses is renewable; we even have a rebate program for grid-connected renewable energy electric-generating systems. Now, we just have to wait for the rest of the country to catch up!

I also received questions on health care, including one on why our Medicare providers are reimbursed at lower levels than doctors in neighboring counties. This is a problem I have been working on for some time now and I hope to see a final solution this year.

The issue revolves around a handful of counties in California that are limited in their Medicare reimbursements by what's known as the Geographic Practice Cost Index. This geographic designation, now 40 years old, labels certain counties as "rural"; even though their economies have changed in the ensuing four decades. I will continue to work to resolve this problem and keep Medicare a viable health care choice for the Central Coast.

Finally, I was asked about my status as a super-delegate for the Democratic presidential nomination process. While I have not yet made up my mind about who I will endorse (the Central Coast split its vote between Obama and Clinton), the question did allow me to express my excitement about this election year.

What we're seeing in the Democratic Party today is an enthusiasm we rarely witness anymore. It's great that so many people are getting caught up in the movement for a change from the broken policies of George Bush. It's my hope that this passion will carry over beyond Election Day and really help shape this country for the better.

I look forward to my next telephone town hall. I plan to host these calls a couple times each year. If you'd like to be added to the list for the next Santa Cruz call, send me an e-mail at CongressmanFarr@mail.house.com.